

The Mother of all Rivers

Gangā is a very special divine liquid energy with mysterious purifying properties, which has perplexed modern scientists for long but till date no one has succeeded in decoding her spiritual powers

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An artistic impression of Gangavataran

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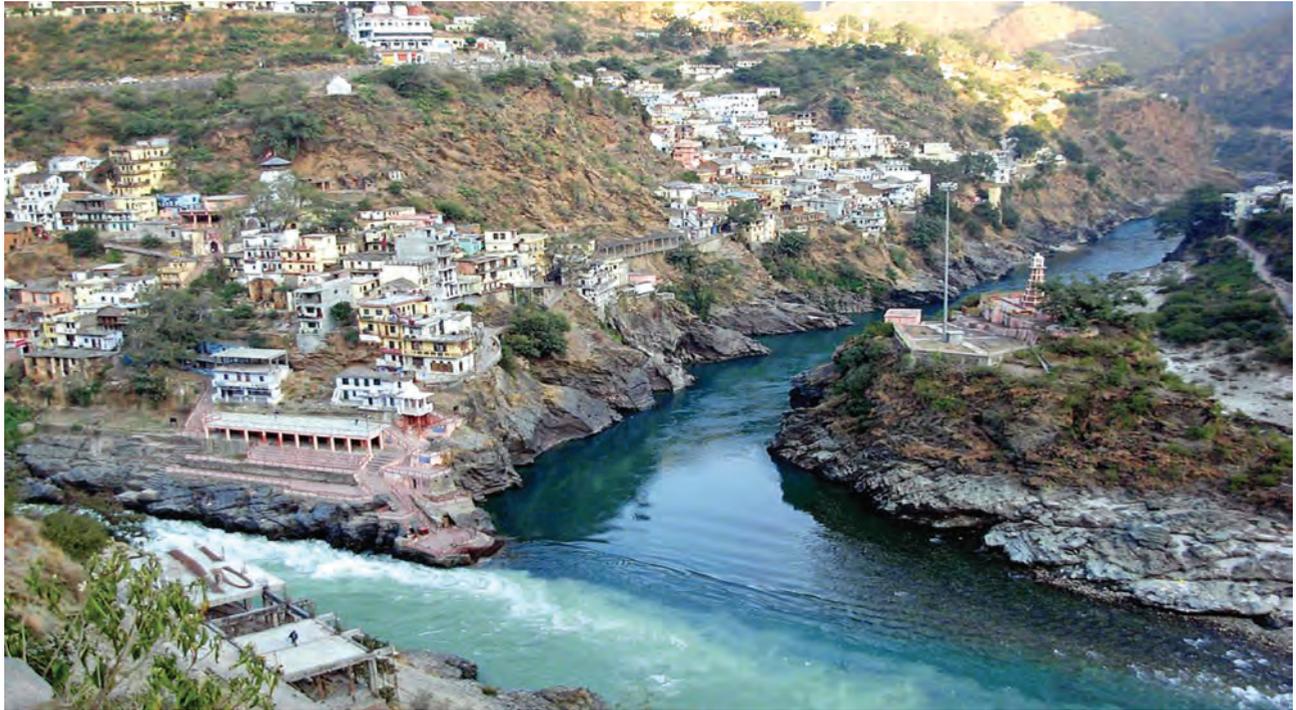
angā! The very name evokes a sense of sanctity, devotion and reverence. It is the only flowing divine entity of sacred waters that has a history of divine origin immortalised as *Bhagirath Prayatna*. The water deity, identified with 'makara' at her feet, brings with it unique power of salvation. It is the spiritual river that has

defined Bharat's culture and civilisation since time immemorial.

'The Gangā occupies an unrivalled position among all rivers of the world. No other river is so closely identified with any country as the Gangā is with India, says Jagmohan Mahajan in *Gangā Observed (Foreign Accounts of the River)*. '... Cities and pilgrimage centers teeming with temples and shrines have sprung up all along its course (milestones in the history of the land

and the growth of Indian civilization). The Gangetic plain has indeed been the pole towards which the political, economic and religious life of the country has gravitated'. Gangā is much more than that.

Maa Gangā has been so integral to us from our birth to death that her water is used at every ceremony for purification, as a charm to ward off evil spirits, sprinkled over the bride and bridegroom at Hindu weddings, and placed into the mouth of the dying, and



Confluence of Alaknanda and Bhagirathi Rivers at Devprayag in Uttarakhand

also serving as a medium for oath-taking. Geographer Strabo calls it the largest river. English traveller Thomas Coryat, who visited Bharat from 1612 to 1617, has called it 'the Captain of all rivers in the world'.

Yet this water of life and death is not just a river as perceived by many. Descending from the heavens as rain, she was created as a channel for human salvation by the vision of Solar Dynasty King Sagara and his five generation of descendants, a task finally accomplished by Bhagirath with the blessings of Lord Shiva. Gangā is not just flowing waters but divine waters endowed with unique properties for our 'moksha'. Some scholars believe that our current understanding and approach to 'river' is based on European ideas and very different from what ancient seers of Bharat conceived.

In the 4th century BC, Megasthenes came from Greece as ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya, leaving the first detailed account of India by a

foreign visitor. He noted that the Indians worshipped the rain-bringing Zeus (Indra), the Gangā River and local deities. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya mentions that 'during drought shall Indra, the Gangā, mountains and Mahakachha (sea or ocean) be worshipped. Textual references prove that the Gangā is actually channeled rainwater.

Mysterious Purifying Powers

Gangā that we revere is a very special divine liquid energy with mysterious purifying properties. This unique and mystifying trait of the Gangā has perplexed modern scientists for long but till date no one has succeeded in decoding the Gangā's spiritual powers.

Mark Twain notes that a scientist named Henkin, who was an employee of the government of Agra, conducted experiments to examine the water. He went to Benares for his tests and took water from the mouths of the sewers where they empty into the river at the bathing-ghats. Tests revealed that a

cubic centimeter of it contained millions of germs; but at the end of six hours they were all dead. He then also caught a floating corpse, towed it to shore, "... and from beside it he dipped up water that was swarming with cholera germs; at the end of six hours they were all dead' writes J Mahajan (Virgo Publication 1994). Repeatedly, he took pure well-water which was barren of animal life, and put into it a few cholera germs, they always began to propagate at once, and always within six hours they swarmed and were numerable by millions upon millions.

Europeans wondered, as many of us still do, 'how did they find out the water's secret in those ancient ages? Had they germ-scientists then? We do not know. We only know that they had a civilization long before we emerged from savagery'. (Mark Twain: *Following the Equator*, 1897).

The most telling image from Devprayag distinctly shows here two flowing water bodies of very different colours. It is pertinent to note that this

is the sacred place of the 'divine confluence' (Dev-prayag) of two rivers that join together, creating Gangā's emergence as one river flowing towards the plains. Also that the chemical properties of such contrasting waters will be different is clear to even an ordinary person.

How does the mixture of two or more variant waters, flowing through mineral rich pristine areas, affect the final properties of the Gangā waters that cleanses? Was this confluence natural or man-made? We know of Panchprayag at Uttarakhand. Waters descend crossing through Vishnuprayag (Dhauliganga-Alakhnanda), Nandprayag (Alakhnanda-Nandakini), Karnaprayag (Alaknanda-Pindar) and Rudraprayag where Alakhnanda meets Mandakini.

What is the significance of the name 'Dev-Prayag' as ancient seers named people or places with certain symbolic identifications? Where or what is the initial source of the mystical properties of Gangā waters? We know that—Gangā water is always sacred as germs do not develop in it. Gangā water is always pure. It has medicinal properties in it. This drinking water has divine traits as stated in ancient texts. Germ free pure water is also mentioned in '*Katoupanishad*'.

Gangā is also called the '*Das Paap Hara Devi*' as she provides solution for ten problems. Gangā Dashera is festival celebrated in recognition of Gangā's power of washing away ten 'Paap' or sins (sin means problems), as also mentioned by Bhojraj (Rajmartand). Was course of waters having divergent properties chartered to form the miracle water?

Divine Water

What is the mystery of this Divine water? It is notable that where the Gangā waters fall on Hemkunt as spring, gold particles are found there. In several places in the Gangā valley there is a tradition to strain gold particles. This gold is called 'Gangāye'. Periplus mentions this.

Did you know?

- *Gangāvataran* was the first sound film, made in 1937 by Dadasaheb Phalke. He directed *Gangā Avataran* on behalf of Kolhapur Movietone.
- The first foreign traveler eventually to go beyond Gangotri was captain Hodgson, whose '*Journal of a Survey to the Heads of Ganges and Jamuna*' in 1817 appeared in 1822. He reached Gangotri on 26 May, 1817, and gives a description of the temple as also measurements of the breadth and depth of the river made by him there. Continuing further, he reached five days later the glacier commonly called Gaumukh, 'the first appearance of the famous and true Ganges'. (*Gangā Observed*, J Mahajan).
- According to a description of marriage ceremonies which were 'celebrated with pomp and great expenditure', the main item of expenditure was the Gangā water. *Jean-Baptiste Tavernier: Travels in India*, (Published in 1676)
- Gangasagar or Sagardwip, is a place of Hindu pilgrimage. Every year on the day of Makar Sankranti (14 January), hundreds of thousands of Hindus gather to take a holy dip at the confluence of river Ganges and Bay of Bengal and offer prayers (puja) in the Kapil Muni Temple. Sagar island is an island in the Ganges delta, at Bay of Bengal, 100 km South of Kolkata.
- The Kumbh Mela is one of the oldest and largest congregations of Indian civilisation. It is the gateway to understand the concept of Creation, based on the story of Creation where the Kumbh, the pot of nectar spilled its contents that led to the formation of the Universe. This is a depiction of the profound description in the Veda of the scientific process of Creation from the cosmic egg called Hiranyagarbha, a golden-hued womb which burst open as Big Bang. Kumbh festival goes back to over 5100 years and more.

Modern scientists are gradually realising the science of Ayurveda, meditation, Yoga and even 'ritual fasting, but will take many decades, if not centuries, to unlock all the secrets unearthed by our ancient seers. Knowledge of our Rishi's came through centuries of penance by understanding and connecting with nature. They unravelled the

depths of 'Vigyan' and planned for welfare of humanity.

The gospel of preventing medicine and science of life 'Ayur-veda' is the '*Charak Samhita*' which means research by travelling to various parts of the land. It was not commercial exploitation as Vedic dharma is based on the principles of Gangā too was channeled from heavenly waters for the welfare of mankind. It is the perfect blend of nature and culture for social engineering the welfare of a civilisation that believed in divine nature of man, nature and all earthy beings. Gangā Maa is a marvelous gift of visionary King Sagara, dedicated efforts of his 60,000 population and sons Anshuman, Dilipa and especially Bhagirath, who is immortalised through Bhagirath river which joins Alakhanda at Devprayag, to finally form the Gangā we know.

(The writer is Chairperson of Draupadi Dream Trust)

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